

**POSITION PAPER ON ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATING WOMEN  
AND DIMINISHING THE POPULATION AT THE ACI**

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE GOVERNOR'S KEATING COMMISSION TO AVOID  
FUTURE PRISON OVERCROWDING AND TERMINATE FEDERAL COURT  
SUPERVISION OVER THE ACI**

by

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Rhode Island Commission on Women is a state agency mandated to work for equity for women in all phases of their lives. This position paper was developed by the Commission's Incarcerated Women's Committee and approved by the Commission in December 1990.

The population of women in prison is increasing dramatically. Nationally, it is up to 130% since 1971. A majority of women offenders commit nonviolent economic crimes: prostitution, shoplifting, check fraud, etc. In Rhode Island, the population of the Women's Division of the ACI has increased tenfold in the past five years, from approximately 25 women to over 250. Because of their numerical inequity in relation to the over 3,000 men incarcerated at the ACI, programs to assist women offenders, both in and outside of the prison, are few in number and generally inadequate in quality. Recently, in response to the serious overcrowding at the Women's Division, the Corrections Department opened a second female prison facility on the ACI grounds, despite the fact that over eighty percent of the women now being held at the ACI are serving sentences of less than a year for non-violent crimes. Considering that it costs an average of \$30,000 a year to keep an inmate at the ACI, it would be cost effective to create innovative and efficient community-based programs for many of the female offenders now being sent to prison in this state. Additionally, these programs would offer women opportunities to learn to care for themselves and their children without going outside the legal system to do so.

## **PROGRAM GOALS**

The goals of the programs, listed in order of importance are to:

- (a) Respond in a rehabilitative way to the type of offenses women offenders generally commit;
- (b) Respond to the problems and costs of incarcerating women offenders with dependent children;
- (c) Respond to the importance of developing independent living skills to prevent recidivism and lessen incentives for women to become re-sentenced to the ACI (should not be used as a rehabilitation center);
- (d) Assist women offenders to overcome their own extreme degree of dependency; and
- (e) Prepare to offer technical assistance and training toward the implementation of other similar programming when requested by local communities.

## **SUGGESTED FUNDING**

Suggestions for funds to provide programs for women offenders that are self-perpetuating:

1. To support alternative sentencing, refine legislation to read: the increase of fees for johns, the garnishment of wages for johns when fees are not paid, and the impoundment of the johns cars until such time as fees are paid;

2. Coordinate all funding services and resources available for these women and their families, including, but not limited to, AFDC, GPA, DCYF, Department of Vocational Resources, MHRH, Department of Employment and Training, HUD, Department of Health and other federal and state agencies;

3. Increase offender fees on women offenders, and explore the possibility of in-kind restitution toward services for female offenders; and

4. Work with the Governor's Justice Commission and the Coalition for Women's Justice to make a concerted effort to access grant monies via state, federal and private agencies and foundations.

- **MENTORING PROGRAM TO PREVENT WOMEN SLIPPING BACK TO THE  
ACI**

The Iota Class of Leadership Rhode Island feels that women leaving prison would have a better chance of not returning to prison in our state if they were to have a mentor to guide and help them through the transition by advising them of educational and employment opportunities.

- **CREATION OF A COALITION FOR WOMEN'S JUSTICE TO PREVENT  
RECIDIVISM AND OVERCROWDING**

The Coalition would coordinate efforts and avoid expensive duplication of services in order to stretch the dollar value and the on-going evaluation and coordination of programs.

## ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

Programs to address the sentencing and rehabilitative problems of incarcerated women are being proposed by the Rhode Island Justice Alliance, Leadership Rhode Island, and other groups. The following examples MAY be the means to address problems faced by women offenders:

### 1. Alternative-to-Prison Sentencing for Women

The goal is to develop a model program for women offenders, especially mothers, that will provide an alternative to prison and would address their needs through a non-residential multi-service day-reporting program. Modeled on successful programs in Boston (Community Services for Women and the Metropolitan Day Reporting Center), New Haven (Project Concern), and in Springfield, Massachusetts (sponsored by the YWCA), the program would involve an individualized community correctional plan for each client. The primary goal of the program would be to provide each woman with an opportunity for rehabilitation and restitution instead of incarceration. The program would, through an intensive counseling component, address the root causes of each women's offense. In addition, social service referrals will be made to agencies that provide the following services as needed for each client:

- daily supervision with unscheduled monitoring
- vocational guidance/job readiness training
- job placement
- parenting education
- alcohol and drug treatment and testing
- housing advocacy
- education (literacy or GED)
- transportation
- mentoring program
- other appropriate community service opportunities

The alternative sentencing program would provide intensive supervision and services for approximately twenty-five to thirty women for a period of three to nine months for each client. During its initial phase, the program will receive referrals. The typical pattern among women offenders convicted of nonviolent offenses in District Court is that they are prison bound upon a third or fourth conviction, having received probation and/or a suspended sentence on their earlier convictions. These are the women who would be the primary clientele for this program, thereby, having a direct impact on the number of women being sentenced to the ACI. A member of the program staff would attend court sessions and receive referrals of potential clients from probation personnel and/or judges. Staff will interview all referrals to determine their suitability for the program.

The chance of contracting breast cancer is 30% greater among women who use substances. Breast self-examination, as well as AIDS education, fetal alcohol syndrome and birth abnormalities will be dealt with in this forum.

- **Progression of Substance Abuse**  
A seminar covering the losses a person experiences and the social stigma assigned by society and culture to women abusers would be taught. Women bear a heavy burden of shame. Women are held to higher standards than men; i.e. there is an idea that women substance abusers are sexually promiscuous, which results in a fear of being branded. Relapse would also be discussed as a part of the progression scale.
- **Adult Children of Alcoholics**  
A forum would be held focusing on growing up in abusive and dysfunctional environments since a large percent of these women grew up with alcoholic parents. Individual family therapy would also address these issues, using a systemic, structural approach to break the intergenerational cycle.
- **Parenting Group**  
Ten to twenty-weeks skills classes would be taught within the shelter. Women would learn to listen and communicate with their children through a weekly lecture, trigger story discussion and activity groups which can be practically applied with their children. It is known that women's sobriety rates are better when they have parenting skills because they can deal sober and straight with the problems that crop up later.

"When Mom is using and abusing, the kids have the power"

#### **OTHER CLIENT SERVICES DIRECTLY RELATED TO RECIDIVISM AND OVERCROWDING**

Other clients services to prevent recidivism to be addressed are: relationships (prostitution included), physical and sexual abuses issues, counseling, job training, job placement, literacy, GED/educational training, medical care, affordable housing, self-esteem, assertiveness, decision making, parenting skills, budgeting, nutrition, substance pre-release planning and other particular needs of the women offenders and their children

### **3. Mentoring Program to Prevent Recidivism**

The Mentoring Program at the ACI Women's Facility, initiated by the Iota Class of Leadership Rhode Island, began in August, 1991 and is currently funded by a grant from Workforce 2000. It is hoped that the Department of Corrections will incorporate this Program

4. **Assistance And Transitional Housing For Women Who Are Leaving Prison And Returning To The Community**

**TRANSITIONAL HOUSING FOR WOMEN OFFENDERS**

Transitional Housing will provide a residential setting for women leaving the prison system, enabling them to have the support and supervision they need to return to society and lead crime-free lives.

Residents would be involved in the development of goals which would assist them with their education, employment, housing and parenting skills. Help with personal problems and addictions which may be at the root of their criminal behavior would be available. Twenty-five to thirty women would reside at the shelter for approximately six to eighteen months until they are able to lead independent lives.

**COALITION FOR WOMEN'S JUSTICE  
TO PREVENT RECIDIVISM AND OVERCROWDING**

The purpose of the Coalition for Women's Justice is to coordinate the whole spectrum of services for incarcerated women and their children in order to prevent expensive duplication of services, on-going evaluation and coordination of programs, to advocate to the community on behalf of women offenders and their families, and to provide mentoring programs for women offenders

....That those who have succeeded may support those in need, because another generation is at risk....

....That one generation, helping one another, can save the next....

**FUNDING**

Funding to provide programs for incarcerated women could come, legislatively mandated, from the withholding of the johns car until fees are paid, the increase of fees to johns and the garnishment of wages when a john refuses to pay his fine; increased offender fees on women offenders; in-kind women offender restitution toward services for female offenders; coordination of all funding services and resources available to these women and their families, including, but not limited to, AFDC, GPA, DCYF, Department of "Vocational Resources, MHRH, Department of Employment and Training, HUD, Department of Health, and other federal and state agencies; and working with the Governor's Justice Commission and the Coalition for Women's Justice to make a concerted effort to access grant monies, especially federal and state funds.

With the advent of programs such as stated in this position paper, the lives of incarcerated women and their children should improve noticeably. Imprisonment is costly and would not be necessary for some women, if alternative sentencing and rehabilitation was successful. With rehabilitation, hopefully, the crime rate would decrease.